

101 because they have among them no such remnants of perishing tribes, appear
648 to know nothing of this fivefold group, but they recognize their close relationship to the Arapaho. There is no very great amount of intercourse between them and the Arapaho at present, nor does there appear to have been any unusual amount of communication during the greater part of the nineteenth century; but on both sides there is a mutual recognition as of separated relatives. The Arapaho are now and apparently have been for a long time considerably the larger tribe, the Gros Ventre having always in historical times been regarded as a small body. Their present number is about 550.

131 According to Hayden, the Gros Ventre, about 1800, were south of the
648 Saskatchewan; about 1820 they united with the Arapaho for a few years, and then, following a quarrel, journeyed north, had a disastrous encounter with the Crow, and became neighbors and allies of the Blackfeet.¹ In spite of the usually close association of the Gros Ventre with the three Blackfoot tribes since that time, they became hostile to them for a time, about forty years ago, and united against them with their own long-standing enemies the Crow. In the course of this hostility the Gros Ventre sustained their heaviest reverse in war within their memory; the greater part of an unusually large war-party, including many Crow, being killed after an attack on a Piegan camp. This happened in 1867, according to Grinnell. The usual enemies of the Gros Ventre, besides the Crow, were other Siouan tribes, such as the Dakota and especially the Assiniboine. They also fought more or less with the Shoshone, and no doubt in alliance with the Blackfeet against the Salish Flathead. They were on the whole friendly with the tribes of their own stock of speech, the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Cree. The habitat of the Gros Ventre in recent times has been the Milk River territory, in which is situated their present reservation, which they occupy jointly with the Assiniboine.

101 The Gros Ventre have also been called Fall, Rapid, and Paunch Indians. The term "Gros Ventre" has also been applied to the Minitari, a Siouan village tribe on the Missouri; and the two tribes have been distinguished as "Gros Ventre of the Prairie" and "Gros Ventre of the Missouri."

174 Gros Ventre tradition brings the tribe from the north; but their story of
131 the division of the tribe while crossing the ice on a great river is found also
[173] among the Blackfeet and the Cheyenne, and is worthless as historical evidence. While their earliest habitat known is north of their present territory, acquaintance of them goes back little more than a century, and there is

¹ See the excellent article by H. L. Scott on The Early History and the Names of the Arapaho, in the *American Anthropologist*, N.S., IX, 545, 1907. From this it appears that, at least from the middle of the eighteenth century on, except for about five years' association with the Arapaho (from 1818 to 1823), the habitat of the Gros Ventre was in the Blackfoot country, between the Saskatchewan and the Missouri.

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Kroeber, Ethnology of the Gros Ventre.

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nothing to show that they had long been in the Saskatchewan region. All that is certain of their previous past is their closer relationship to the Arapaho than to any other tribe; and the origin of the Arapaho is equally obscure, except that it is certain that, if they came from the north and east, it was a long time ago. Of the Gros Ventre it can only be said that, while related to the Arapaho and regarded by them as almost politically a part of themselves, they were far separated from them when first known, with them for a short time later, and again separated, and in contact and alliance with another much more distantly related Algonkin branch. Their habitat in a hundred years has been successively near the Saskatchewan, the Platte, and the Missouri. There is nothing to show that such variability of affiliation and location within the culture region of the Plains has not been characteristic of their previous history.

The Gros Ventre call the tribes near them by the following names: Arapaho, *hinan'an* (in Arapaho, *hinanaci-na'*); Cheyenne, *itison*, "scars" (itiso, "a scar," Arapaho name of the Cheyenne, *hitaciina'*); Cree, *na'tsa'*, "rabbits;" Ojibwa, *djinhuna'tsa'*, "Lower Cree;" the three Blackfoot tribes, *waotä'nixtääts*, "black-feet" (a Blackfoot, *waotä'nixtänin*, "black-foot-man;" a Piegan, *tsä't'*; the Bloods, *ka'winahai'*); Assiniboine, *na'djineihin*; Sioux, *na'wina'djineci*, "Below-Assiniboine" (in Arapaho, *na'tineci*, "a Sioux"); Crow, *hounen*, "crow-men;" Minitari, *wuxnokayan*, "lodges;" Shoshone, *sosöyänin*, "snake-men;" Bannock, *waotä'niximin*, "black-men" (in Arapaho the Ute are called *waotänahiqi*, "black"); Flathead Salish, *ka'kaäünin*, "flathead-man;" Nezperce, *taniibats*, "pierced-nose" (Arapaho *taniibäüci* is the Caddo). Two tribes to the southwest or perhaps west, which have not been identified, are the *wasö'hiyehits*, "grass-dwellers," who live in houses of grass or brush; and the *na'wuxa-anibiima'ts*, "fish-eaters."

The Gros Ventre were divided into groups similar to those of the Blackfeet and Sioux. The names of these bands were nicknames, and in no way totemic. As there was prohibition of marriage within the band, the name "clan" is, however, applicable to them. Descent was paternal and a man belonged to his father's band; but the prohibition of marriage extended also to his mother's clan, all the members of both the father's and mother's clan-being considered relatives. Each band seems to have had a recognized head or chief. During the winter the tribe broke into smaller groups, consisting of one or perhaps more clans, which followed the buffalo, and camped chiefly in the timber. There corrals were made for the horses at night to prevent their being stolen by war-parties. When summer came, the clans joined and camped together in the large camp-circle. In this, the opening of which was toward the east, the different bands had definite

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2: Flannery E-5 (1940-1948) 1953
NQ13 Gros Ventre NQ13

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FORT BELKNAP RESERVATION AND SURROUNDING AREA

[P. 11]

INTRODUCTION

The Algonquian-speaking Gros Ventres live on the Fort Belknap Reservation in North Central Montana. The Reservation is a small part of the land claimed by this tribe in 1887, when the boundaries were finally fixed. At present, the Gros Ventres number between a thousand and eleven hundred, and they share their territory with almost as many Assiniboine. The latter tribe was included in the settlement of the Reservation although it did not participate with the Gros Ventres and Blackfoot tribes in the Treaty of 1855. In spite of some intermarriage, the two groups have never really blended and the Gros Ventres tend to center at the village of Hays at the southern part of the Reservation while the Assiniboine are clustered around Lodge Pole, a settlement some ten miles east of Hays. The Indian Agency is approximately forty miles north of Hays at the northern boundary of the Reservation and close to the town of Harlem on the Great Northern Railroad. Of importance to the Gros Ventres, who are predominantly Roman Catholic, is St. Paul's Mission and School which lie at the foot of the Little Rockies only a mile south of Hays. David Rodnick has given an excellent description of the geographical setting of the Reservation for his study of modern conditions and of acculturation among the Fort Belknap Assiniboine.

Of the several tribes in the Northern Plains region, the Gros Ventres are perhaps the least known. Although they maintained intact their tribal identity, and were recognized as fierce warriors, they were often mistakenly identified with the Blackfoot tribes, with whom they were frequently allied. Moreover, little was known of the Gros Ventre language except that it was an exceedingly difficult one; practically every independent observer during the nineteenth century remarks on this fact. Since, however, many Gros Ventre men knew Blackfoot, the linguistic difference was often overlooked and the Gros Ventres tended to be counted as one of the Blackfoot tribes. As part of the so-called "Blackfoot Nation," leaders of the Gros Ventres signed the Treaty of 1855.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

LOCATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The earliest available sources show that in the eighteenth century the Gros Ventres were in the Canadian plains region, far removed from their Arapaho kinsmen. Just where or when the Gros Ventres and Arapaho parted cannot be determined. As Kroeber has pointed out, their tradition of separating while crossing a large frozen body of water on which the ice broke, is not reliable, especially in view of similar traditions of tribal separations current among other peoples.¹ It is possible that there may be some truth in the tradition which Father De Smet had from the Gros Ventres in 1846, namely, that they had become separated from the Arapaho a hundred and fifty years before that date.² This would allow, however, only the bare minimum of time which Kroeber has suggested as necessary to account for the linguistic differentiation between Arapaho and Gros Ventre. It would seem a little late also should Morton be correct in identifying as Gros Ventres the tribe, in the region of the Saskatchewan River to the west of the Assiniboine, whom Kelsey mentions in 1691.³

The difficulty of exactly locating the Gros Ventres during the first half of the eighteenth century is all the greater in view of the fact that the observers often used general terms, rather than tribal designations, for the plains peoples as distinct from the Cree and Assiniboine. Among such terms are "equestrian natives," "slaves," and various renditions of the Cree word *ayatchiyiniw*,⁴ literally "foreign man, stranger"—the generic Cree term by which all hostile peoples are called. The Cree were closely as-

¹ Kroeber, 1908, p. 146.

² De Smet, p. 265, note.

³ Kroeber, 1908, p. 145; Morton, p. 113; Kelsey Papers, p. 16, mentions a nation who "knew not ye use of Canoes and were resolved to go to wars."

⁴ Cf. LaCombe, p. 325.

10 *The Gros Ventres of Montana: Part I, Social Life*

175 acts of depredation were long remembered and formed the basis
648 for the bad reputation the Gros Ventres sustained among the
traders. Henry, speaking of them in 1808 as an audacious and
turbulent race, says that they have repeatedly attempted to
massacre the traders.⁵⁵

During the early part of the nineteenth century the Gros Ventres continued losing ground to the Assiniboiné and Cree. Harmon, again in 1801, mentions, for instance, that a party of Cree-Assiniboiné had left Fort Alexandria in June against the Rapid Indians and were bringing a number of women and children for "slaves."⁵⁶ In 1803 he records that 40 lodges of Cree-Assiniboiné went out on a war party with 40 lodges of "others," apparently against both the Blackfoot and Rapid Indians.⁵⁷ Incidentally, as the Gros Ventres were pushed out of the Saskatchewan basin, they no longer formed a buffer between the Cree-Assiniboiné and Blackfoot, and these latter came into more direct and deadly conflict. Having rebuilt South Branch House in 1805, Harmon was there in April 1806 when the Cree-Assiniboiné in that region went to war against the Rapid Indians, "their inveterate enemies, with whom they frequently patch up peace which is generally short endurance."⁵⁸ In August of that same year some Assiniboiné reported to Harmon that about 80 tents of Cree-Assiniboiné, with about as many of the Blackfoot, were on their way to war against the Gros Ventres. Nothing came of this expedition, however, inasmuch as the temporary allies began quarreling over a horse which each claimed and ended in an all-day fight between them.⁵⁹

And so it went. By 1808 the Gros Ventres had been replaced in the area between the forks of the Saskatchewan and now roamed the territory between the South Branch and the Missouri, although some of them at least went to the posts to trade. Henry remarks that at this time they were bringing to Fort Vermillion a good trade in dried provisions, beaver skins, and grizzly bear and buffalo

⁵⁵ Henry, v. 2, p. 530.

⁵⁶ Harmon, p. 55.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 78.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 119.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 120.

Historical Background

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the latter tribe that they appeared to him "to have the advantage of the others in being more adroit, more docile, and more courageous; but they are more attached to their old superstitions and are terrible *demanders*; as the Canadian employees here call shameless beggars; happily they are not offended when refused." In addition, he stated that if the Gros Ventres were less importunate he would willingly entitle them the Flatheads of the Missouri "as they have something of their simplicity and bravery." He considered that "the Piegans are the most civilized but the most noted thieves; the Blood well made and generally less dirty; while the Blackfeet proper are, it is said, the most hospitable." Among all four tribes Father Point found the disproportion of sexes great, and attributed to warfare the preponderance of women over men.**

The heart of the area held by the Gros Ventres at that time, and claimed by them subsequently at least until the establishment of the Fort Belknap Reservation in 1873, and probably until 1888, was described by Hayden as follows: "At present [1862] and for many years past, they range along the Milk River, on the east side of the Missouri, extending as far as the Cypress Mountains. From this line to the Marias River stretches a beautiful level country well covered with grass and adapted to pasturage of buffalo. Here the Indians under consideration may be found at all seasons—in the winter along the banks of the Milk River where wood may be obtained and in summer on the plains where fuel is not so necessary."** As the Gros Ventres were by no means confined to this area they were in intermittent conflict with surrounding tribes.

With a view to settling the quarrels of the Blackfoot, Piegan and Gros Ventres east of the mountains, and of the Flathead, Kootenais and Nez Percé and others west of the mountains, Governor Stevens held a council with the Gros Ventres on the Milk River in August, 1853, and with the Blackfoot and Piegan at Fort Benton in September.** In 1854, he ordered a thousand dollars worth of goods from Culbertson of the American Fur Company, for distribution to the Piegan and Gros Ventres. These goods, consisting mainly of foodstuffs with which they were un-

** Father Point's letter of 1847, in De Sinet, pp. 254, 256.

** Hayden, p. 340.

** Hoopes, p. 101.

CHAPTER II

TRIBAL ORGANIZATION

The greater bulk of our material on the Gros Ventres covers the fifty year span from about 1835 to 1885. During that period, the tribal territory centered about the Milk River. The present Reservation, the boundaries of which were finally fixed in 1888, represents only a small part of the land claimed and held by the Gros Ventres as their own. [13] • [648]

BAND NAMES AND AFFILIATION

The political organization of the Gros Ventres was simple. The division into fairly autonomous bands was basic, and apparently the number of bands was twelve. Our informants, both those who were adult and those who were children, at the time when the whole tribe still encamped as a unit, agreed on that point. The list of band names given by our two oldest informants, Coming Day-light (b. 1854) and Singer (b. ca. 1856), is as follows: Coffees, Same as Assiniboine, Plenty Bad, Greys, Fast Travelers, Water Horses Once a Day, Upper Quarters, Frozens, Buffalo Overloaded, Tendons, Bloods, Night Hawks. These two old women maintained that, in their own experience, the bands camped in this order, and in a circle, when the whole tribe was together. [619] [621] [115]

Quite independently of the above list, another was obtained from The Boy (b. 1870). As a child he witnessed the formation of the camp circle, and he knows many details of previous decades from his father, Lane Bull (b. ca. 1825, d. 1890) and from other old men. The Boy's list agrees with that given by the two women, except in regard to one band. He includes a group called Poor Greys and omits Night Hawks. All of our informants insisted that the Greys and Night Hawks were distinct bands, but there was a difference of opinion as to whether or not the Greys and Poor Greys were in reality the same band. [621] [115] [114]

Seven of the band names can be identified with Kroeber's num- [621]

The Flat Pipe

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take you to a camp of Gros Ventres.' 'Who are they?' she asked, 'What is their name?' The woman told her: 'A little short man called Warrior Man,' who was a brother of the returned woman through marriage.

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"So the woman took the returned Gros Ventre woman to this camp and said: 'I have brought you a Gros Ventre woman. Come and see who it is.' As soon as they saw who it was, they were glad and took her and kissed her and gave her everything good.

"One evening a few days later Warrior Man and his wife got ready and before sunup started off for the big Gros Ventre camp. He walked while Crow Bull's wife rode horseback. It was spring-time with wet snow still on the ground. The big camp was at Big Sandy, on the north side of Milk River at the place where the trees stop. They arrived there early in the morning and did not know where to go. I, Coming Daylight, saw the man and the two women approaching and went out to see who they were. The man asked: 'Where is Crow Bull's lodge?' I then saw them go to Crow Bull's lodge. All at his lodge were glad to see the returned captive and kissed her.

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"Later when the ground got dry, the whole tribe moved to their usual place here at what is now Hays. Crow Bull made good his vow to take the Flat Pipe if his wife got back safe to him, and I witnessed the transfer, by the keeper of the time, Lame Bull. The rite took place just about a half mile north of where St. Paul's Mission now is."

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Crow Bull kept the Pipe a long time, until his death in 1887, upon which it fell to his widow, an Assiniboiné woman named Coming Day. This woman neglected the Pipe. Coming Daylight told her: "Now, this Pipe is just like your father. Why is he always left alone? He was never left alone before. Now I have a mare and this Pipe has a saddle. Put the Pipe on the saddle and take it to White Bird. He will take care of it." So they went to White Bird and talked to him first. He agreed to take it over without rite or vow. On the request of a young man, Bird Sits High, the Pipe was transferred to him. This young man died soon after and his father, Otter Robe, took it upon himself to harbor the Pipe. When Otter Robe died, sometime prior to 1908,